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Hayden White, Postmodern Anxieties, and the Linguistic Turn

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Abstract

This essay examines what remains of the Linguistic turn (LT) after Hayden White, in the two meanings of the preposition "after": "subsequent to" and "according to". For White, the LT (under the umbrella of postmodernism) has made it possible to transcend a number of distinctions, such as those between text and context, fact and fiction, and history and literature. Those distinctions, however, are still defended by a large part of the historical community, including by scholars involved in experimental works, such as I. Jablonka. Furthermore, some philosophers hold the debates about the LT to be irrelevant. The specificity of history, for them, does not reside in its formal aspects (e.g., its use of narrative), but in its relations to evidence. History, like all scientific disciplines, must validate its statements, namely, establish that they are well founded and justified.

Keywords: linguistic turn, postmodernism, constructivism, relativism, fact

1. Introduction

The issue of knowing what now remains of the Linguistic Turn (LT) has been widely debated over the past twenty years. François Hartog (2013: 111), for instance, in the chapter of *Croire à l'histoire* he devotes to the "disturbing strangeness" of his discipline, deems that the approach is "no

longer but the theme of a funeral oration: it appeared, seduced (some people), opened (at times) new questions… and then receded: historians moved to something else". This fate, Hartog continues quoting Péguy, is common in intellectual history: scholars "hammer away at a question for fifteen or twenty years", then suddenly "turn their back to it": they "no longer know what they were talking about, and for that matter no longer talk about it". Frank Ankersmit (2013: 424), at the other end of the spectrum, takes the LT to be the "third and last stage" in the philosophy of history since World War I. Succeeding the discussions about the covering law model and then hermeneutics, the LT gained in the 1970s a "quick and easy victory" over its opponents, bringing the philosophy of history "in line with contemporary philosophy of language". Since then, according to Ankersmit, "not much has changed" "One can safely say that the paradigm of the linguistic turn is still the dominant one", and "we should be happy with this". Indeed, "many aspects of the use of language in historical writing still need to be explored", an inquiry that can be productively conducted through a "cross-fertilization between the philosophy of history and the philosophy of language". Returning in an essay initially published in 2011 to topics he had dealt with in the 1980s and 1990s, Peter Schöttler (2018: 153) adopts an intermediate position. For him, some of the challenges ("Provokationen") issued by the LT are still valid. The main one is of a "scientific-methodological" nature. It consists of the reliance on "discourse and language analysis" to examine historiographic texts, a reliance that makes facts "look different", even though it does not "dissolve them into discourse" (155). Schöttler is more skeptical toward the continuing legitimacy of the LT's "philosophical challenge", namely, "relativism" (153). That all truth can be "doubted", for Schöttler, does not mean that there is no "scientific truth" (157). Disciplines have a specific view of

what may count as true in their area of scholarship, and they have devised procedures that – if followed – will warrant the veracity of their findings.

2. The Linguistic Turn According to White

My purpose, to answer one of this journal's editors' suggestions in their call for papers, is to examine the status of the LT after Hayden White, in the two meanings of the preposition "after": "subsequent to" and "according to". In so doing, I am appropriating the title structure of, and some of the issues discussed in, *Philosophy of History After Hayden White*, a collection of essays edited by Robert Doran (2013). The phrase "LT" may have different meanings, which historians interested in the theory of their discipline (e.g., Delacroix, 2010; Munslow, 2006; Müller, 2006) have sought to chart. White himself (2013: 38), in his contribution to Doran's anthology, describes the LT as the shift of "analytical attention" from "the object (or referent) of historiological research to the products of that research, the written texts in which historians present their findings"; or, in more abstract terms, as the idea of history as a "constructivist enterprise based on a textualist conception of the relation between language and reality" (40). I will, as White does, use LT in the sense of "analytical attention lent to the formal aspects of historical studies". Still, I am aware that the term, more radically, may refer to the idea that "there are no 'facts' outside language, and no 'reality' other than that which presents itself under some linguistic description" (Norris, 2005: 524). It is this extreme meaning that is attributed to the LT by British historians such as Gareth Stedman Jones, Keith Baker, and Patrick Joyce, for whom "class", for example, is but "an effect of theoretical discourse on relations of production and distribution" (Stedman Jones, 1983: 7). White, to my knowledge, has never situated himself with respect to this drastic version

of the LT, a version that many historians reject because, as Roger Chartier (1998: 96) puts it, they deem it illegitimate "to reduce the practices of the social world to the principles that control discourse".

Because White's theories about the types of plots and tropes that historians use to represent the past are well known, I won't rehearse them once again. To account for White's intervention into the debates about the LT, I will look closely at "Postmodernism and Textual Anxieties", a text originally given as a lecture at a 1996 colloquium in Sweden, and then published in the anthology *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory 1957-2007* (2010). Although White does not turn to the label "LT" in "Postmodernism and Textual Anxieties", this piece can be viewed as representative of his position in the late 1990s toward the debates about the role of language in the historical endeavor. More precisely, it can be taken as representative of what White thinks the LT has unquestionably established, of the changes that historians should now take for granted if they want their profession to remain relevant.

White (2010a: 312) proceeds in this essay by identifying seven "distinctions" that postmodernism has supposedly "transcended". I will examine them as he lists them, linking at times White's explanation of what postmodernists "believe" with similar theses developed by other theorists. According to White, the distinctions that postmodernism has overcome are:

1. Between "events and their representation in discourse". Postmodernists "believe that events exist and have existed in the real world" (312), but that the real world does not tell what should count as an event, nor how they should be recounted. That decision is up to the historian, and it is a matter of both scale and relevance. The

fall of the Berlin Wall, to take an example in White's own essay, will count as one event in a short history of Germany. But it will be broken into several events in a study of German reunification, even into more events in a book devoted to 9 November 1989. In other words, as one of White's most vocal allies, Keith Jenkins (1995: 36), puts it when advocating the postmodernist position, "[e]vents are singled out for attention not because of their intrinsic interest, but because of the logic of the text; they are not material realities, but the organizing units of historical discourse".

2. Between "documents and (literary) texts". Postmodernists "believe that all documents… are texts, and that this means that they must be submitted to the same explicative techniques as those used on literary texts" (White, 2010a: 312). White's point here is that historians tend to read documents for their explicit content, neglecting textual features that may be part of the information. White finds in this area a supporter in Dominick LaCapra (2000: 21), who, having defined the LT as the "recognition of the problematic nature of language", goes on to argue that documents must "be read textually", applying "critical scrutiny" to "the manner in which they construct their object in an institutional and ideological field" (26). In other words, for LaCapra as for White, documents should not be treated differently from other texts. They should not be the object of what LaCapra (34) calls a "synoptic reading" focused on contents, but of a "deconstructive reading" (42) attentive to possible tensions between what the text states expressly and some aspects of its language.

3. Between "(literary) texts and their social context". Postmodernists "do think that the social context is itself a text or is apprehended only by way of text" (White, 2010a: 312). White here makes

two moves. First, he defends what he had called earlier "textualism": the idea that "the written text constitutes a paradigm of culture, that cultural production can be best understood on the model of textual production, and that the interpretation of culture is best carried out by practices of reading exactly analogous to those used in the reading of texts" (310). Then, he objects to the notion of the context as a fixed and coherent entity, against which the complexity of a text can so-to-speak be measured. Since the context "is itself a text", it is not "immediately accessible to commonsensical procedures of reading and interpretation" (313). It must be "read" carefully, keeping in mind that its constituents are not necessarily stable and homogeneous. The intellectual background here is the celebrated exchange between Jacques Derrida (1977a, 1977b), and John Searle (1977) on – among other things – the very topic of the "context". White here implicitly stands with Derrida, since he denies that the context of a statement can ever be comprehensively described.

4. Between "literal and figurative speech". Postmodernists "think that any attempt to represent reality in language must run against the fact that there is no literal language, that all language is in its 'essence' figurative" (White, 2010a: 313). At the level of the individual sign, White here endorses one of the chief tenets of Saussurian theory, namely, the idea that linguistic signs do not "represent reality" in a manner that makes them physically resemble the objects to which they refer. At the level of the discourse, the assertion that language is basically "figurative" extends the point White had made about documents: a text should not be reduced to its explicit content, since it "is always saying something more or other than what it seems to be saying" (*Ib.*). Historiographic texts can thus be the object of

the "deconstructive reading" advocated by LaCapra, a reading that will seek to identify the "more" or the "other" that they may include. White's insistence on the figurativeness of language also leads to his well-known theory of tropes, a point to which I will later return.

5. Between "the referent of a discourse and the subject of a discourse". Postmodernists "believe that the subject of a discourse is always substituted for its apparent referent" (*Ib*.). The intellectual background here is Roland Barthes's (1984: 175-176) analysis of the "referential illusion" at work in historical discourse: the "elimination of the signified from 'objective' discourse", an elimination that "apparently leaves the 'real' face to face with its expression". Postmodernists, according to White, reject the idea of a direct link between the referent and the signifying. Instead, they claim that historiographic discourse always originates in a "double construction" (313): historians first decide on a subject (say, again, the Fall of the Berlin Wall), then on the facts that are relevant to that subject. For White, this double construction takes the historian "further and further away from the referent rather than closer and closer to it" (*Ib*.). Postmodernists historians, however, are aware of this "process of alienation" (*Ib*.), and they now make it into a part of the self-reflexive component that they regard as a requisite of their discourse.

6. Between "fact and fiction". "Since facts are themselves linguistic constructions, 'events under a description', *facts* have no reality outside of language" (*Ib*.). The intellectual background here is again Barthes (1984: 175), in this instance, the (in)famous statement "le fait n'a jamais qu'une existence linguistique", a statement that White (1987) already had put opposite the front page of *The Content of the Form*. Often misunderstood, the phrases "linguistic

constructions" and "linguistic existence" do not deny the reality of the past; they only mean that facts (just like events) are not "out there", ready to be picked up; they are constructed in history as they are in any scientific discipline, the historian singling out traces of the past and giving names to them in accordance with an hypothesis about what should count as a fact. I will return later to the issues raised by the polysemy of the term "fiction".

7. Between "history and literature". Postmodernism "presumes that since historical writing is a kind of discourse, and especially a narrative discourse, there is no substantial difference between *representations* of historical reality and *representations* of imagined events and processes" (White, 2010a: 313). The key here is the italicization of the term "representation". White does not claim that there is no epistemological difference between real and imagined "events and processes". He merely rehearses the thesis he had expounded in *Metahistory*, namely, that at the level of the discourse, historical and literary "representations" may follow similar patterns. On the plane of the emplotment, in particular, historical narratives – at least the nineteenth-century narratives analyzed in *Metahistory* – conform to the models described by Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism*: their structures are those of the tragedy, the comedy, the romance, and the satire, a kinship which does mean that their cognitive program is similar to that of literature.

3. A Dialogue of the Deaf?

Is White's suggestion that postmodernism has definitively erased "distinctions" that traditional scholarship took as well established now accepted by most historians? According to the intellectual historian Elizabeth Deeds

Ermarth (2007: 53), this is far from being the case. "Decades after Hayden White's *Metahistory*", she writes, "it still is taboo to suggest that historical writing is not basically objective; that its methods are fundamentally literary, or that historical conventions belong to a historically limited phase of Eurocentric culture, or that historical writing functions to produce a 'reality effect', or that narrative of 'the' past is 'just us back there throwing our voices'". On the list of the "taboos" that White aims to challenge, the idea that the textuality of historical productions links them to "fiction" or "literature" has particularly angered a whole part of the historical community. François Bédarida (1995: 422), for example, founder and for a long time head of the prestigious Institut d'histoire du temps présent, indignantly rejects the idea that history should be a '*fiction-making operation*'", which resorts to "the same techniques of construction of discourse as literature". What reassures him is the fact that White's theories originate in a specific intellectual environment, and thus are not universally accepted. In France, at least, according to Bédarida, "the principle of the search for truth as fundamental intention of the construction of knowledge, has firmly held in the historical endeavor". Georg Iggers (1997: 118) makes the same point when, in a chapter of his *Historiography in the Twentieth Century* emphatically titled "The Linguistic Turn: The End of History as a Scholarly Discipline?", he describes the "basic idea of the postmodern theory of history" as being "the denial that history refers to an actual past". Similar to Bédarida, Iggers also vehemently condemns the notion that "historiography does not differ from fiction but is a form of it". Such stance, according to him, can only lead to the view that "there are no criteria for truth in historical narrative", a view that would mark "the end of history as a scholarly discipline".

From my own corner of scholarship, literary theory, the issue is not to decide whether historical and fictional discourses should be collapsed; it is to agree on the terms of the debate, in this instance, on the sense of the phrases in dispute. The precise meaning of "fiction" is a case in point. According to the specialist of comparative literature Fiona McIntosh-Varjabédian (2008: 10), for example, "fiction" must be taken in its "etymological sense" when applied to historical writing; deriving from the verb *fingere*, it refers to activities of shaping, molding, and figuring. Thus, when White titles one of his essays "The Fictions of Factual Representation", he does not for McIntosh-Varjabédian suggest that "fiction" is synonymous with "pure invention" (14); he merely states the thesis he briefly rehearses in the essay I am considering (entry # 6), namely, that the data the historian has gathered must at some point be fashioned into a text. "Fiction", however, may also in the current classification of discourses refer to "narrative works of imagination", or even, to quote the subtitle of the book Olivier Caïra (2011*)* has devoted to this subject, to anything imaginary "from the novel to chess". Bédarida and Iggers obviously take the term in the sense of "narrative works of imagination" when they indict White for asserting that history is a "fiction-making operation". That claim, for them, implies that historical studies have the same epistemological status as novels, and are thus unable to reach "truth" or to account for the "real past".

A similar remark can be made about the controversies bearing on White's inclusion of history under "literature", an inclusion he reasserts in point # 7 of "Postmodernism and Textual Anxieties". In this instance, again, it is indeed obvious that the participants in the dispute are involved in a dialogue of the deaf. Deriving from the Latin *literature*, "literature" originally referred to "any body or written works", or even to "all written

works". It thus admitted history, with which it has maintained relations too long to trace here, all the more so since they have been the subject of several authoritative studies (e.g., Gossmann, 1990; Lavocat, 2016). It will suffice to say that the term "literature" today seems to have at least four meanings. It can refer (1) to all written works, (2) to all written works of imagination, (3) to all "good" written works, and (4) to all "good" written works of imagination. (Issues raised by oral literature cannot be addressed here). Bédarida clearly takes the term in meaning (2) when he blames White for stating that history uses "the same techniques of construction of discourse as literature". Whether White gives "literature" meaning (1) or (2) when he states that postmodernism has transcended the distinctions between history and literature does not really matter. Indeed, the level at which he locates the similarities between historical and literary texts is that of the "deep structures" that both discourses have in common. In "The problem of style in realist representation: Marx and Flaubert" (2010b), for example, White argues that *Le Dix-Huit Brumaire de Louis Bonaparte* and *L'Education sentimentale* have the same plot line: both are organized on the model of the *Bildungsroman*, as they follow characters whose evolution can be described in terms of tropes: the consciousness of the heroes (the French bourgeoisie in *Le Dix-Huit Brumaire*, Frédéric in *L'Education*) move from a "metaphorical" to an "ironic" understanding of the relations they have to reality. White, however, does not suggest that the two texts make similar truth claims. *L'Education* may say "something true" (and conservatively usable by historians) about French society around 1850, but only *Le Dix-Huit Brumaire* stages situations and characters whose existence can be verified in the archives – a specificity of historical discourse that White has never thought to question.

4. Jablonka's Intervention

White's call for history to (re)claim membership in literature has recently received an unlikely support in an essay that also constitutes a major contribution to the debates about the LT: Ivan Jablonka's *L'Histoire est une littérature contemporaine. Manifeste pour les sciences sociales*. I am saying "unlikely" because Jablonka only mentions White to attack him as a dangerous representative of postmodernism, and does not enlist him as an ally who could help advance the provocative thesis already stated in the title of the book: history should not be defined against literature, as Bédarida and Iggers do, but as being part of it. Jablonka (2014: 243-246) takes most explicitly "literature" in meanings (3) and (4). The term for him only refers to "good" works (of imagination and others), that is, to works which have an "aesthetic intention" evidenced in their "form" – their display of such characteristics as "imagination, "polysemy", and "singularity". History, as long as it includes attributes of this kind, can be admitted into literature, which Jablonka here is not afraid to take in its most institutional sense: a "set of canonical texts, canonized, gathered by a tradition, acknowledged by a culture, made familiar by a teaching" (246). "Fiction", on the other hand, defined as "an imaginary narrative in which characters, places, and actions do not exist" (240), does not for Jablonka necessarily have a place in literature. Novels in the "Harlequin series thus cannot be viewed as "literary" (248), because they lack the properties (imagination, polysemy, etc.) that would make them worthy of this qualifier.

Close to White in his advocacy for the inclusion of history in literature, Jablonka also shares – though he does not mention the kinship – White's diagnosis of the state of history writing. Starting with the oft-quoted essay "The Burden of History" (1966), White has not ceased to deplore that his

discipline never underwent a modernist revolution: that the works of writers such as Proust, Joyce, Yeats, Kafka, Musil, and Woolf have no equivalent in history, whose practitioners continue to abide by textual conventions set in the nineteenth century. Although he does not use the term "modernism", which seems to be reserved for the Anglo-American periodization of cultural history, Jablonka makes the same case. He, too, regrets that historians have not been bolder, that they have not striven to emulate – Jablonka's list is close to White's – the experiments of novelists such as "Proust, Woolf, Joyce, Musil, Faulkner, Dos Passos, and Céline" (275). Arguing that history can become the site of "literary experimentations" (249, Jablonka also makes several suggestions. Historians could thus "tell a story in regressive manner"; "follow a character" while respecting "the futures that open themselves to him"; start a narrative with "several beginnings", but "without providing an end (or vice-versa)"; put "slices of life face to face"; trace "the history of an incoherence"; and "mix *verbatim* interviews, images, and video documents" (279).

Jablonka devotes his last chapter to explaining the principles that have guided his own attempt at "experimentation": *Histoire des grands-parents que je n'ai pas eus* (2014). In this book, he does two things: he reconstructs the history of the grand parents "he did not have" because they were deported in 1943 and he was born thirty years later, and he tells the story of his own research of their lives and times. The "literary and epistemological experiment", according to Jablonka, consist here in "recounting the method" (283). That is, in describing "the researcher's position" (284); in explaining the way "research is conducted" (291); in "narrating the investigation" (295); and in accomplishing these various tasks while turning systematically to the first person singular – both an "epistemological liberty" and a "writing choice" (*Ib*.). Most important,

L'Histoire des grands-parents que je n'ai pas eus includes the component that Jablonka holds as essential if history is to move beyond the belief that scholars can be absent from their endeavor: "self-reflexivity" (301). Showing "how things are done" (302), the book spells out the decisions the investigator had to make when it came to choosing a point-of-view, advancing hypotheses, finding examples, and laying out evidence. Paradoxically, Jablonka's election of the "self-reflexive mode" (301) would make him into a postmodernist historian, at least by White's definition. Indeed, after arguing (point # 5) that the realization of the constructiveness of their discourse leads historians "further and further away from the referent", White (2010: 313) states that postmodernist scholars, "taking this process of alienation of the referent into account", feature it "as an element of [their] own discourse". In brief, self-reflexivity for White is ,a key component of postmodernist historiography; its representatives, just like Jablonka, are eager to show "how things are done" in this instance, to be as explicit as possible about the way their research is shaped by an ever present researcher.

While Jablonka deplores the current state of history writing and makes suggestions for changes, he does not trace his interest in the formal aspects of historiography to the issues raised by the LT in general, nor by White in particular. To the contrary, joining in this respect with Iggers and Bédarida, he insists that making history into a "verbal fiction" deprives the discipline of "any cognitive regime of its own" (106), and that viewing facts as "only having a linguistic existence" turns history into a "semiological machine that produces meanings without relation to the real, a verbal construction that is untied to any context" (107). In sum, a mix of "nihilo-dandyism and paranoid skepticism", the LT remains dangerous since it gives weapons to the "those who state that gas chambers

are only 'discourse'" (108-109). Jablonka deems relevant to add that White has been "influenced by the idealism of the fascist philosopher Giovanni Gentile" (109), an allegation that – while not expressly turning White into a fascist – links him and the LT with right-wing ideologies after labeling them accomplices of Holocaust deniers.

Jablonka's charges cannot be discussed here in detail. To keep with my topic, the LT "after" Hayden White, I will only mention that Jablonka takes "fiction" to mean "imaginary narratives" and does not consider, as McIntosh-Varjabédian suggests, that it might be understood in its etymological sense when applied to historiography: historical texts do not write themselves, but rather must at some point must be "fashioned". Similarly, Jablonka does not consider that Barthes's phrase about the "linguistic existence" of facts could be taken as an endorsement of a basic form of constructivism: data for Barthes and White are not out there, but must be identified and tagged. Jablonka, for that matter, does not state anything different when he writes that "the historian 'invents' the facts, insofar as he looks for them, establishes them, orders them, ranks them, and links them along explanatory chains" (248). Jablonka here does not just agree with White but resorts to White's own vocabulary; terms such as "invention", together with "imagination", recur frequently in White's writings to describe the activities that historians deploy when they go about their job of researching and representing the past.

Although Jablonka thinks that the LT "today is dead" (109), the violence of his attacks shows that some historians may still regard it as a threat to the integrity of their discipline. White has long answered the charge that constructivism leads to relativism, and that relativism means that anything goes. Constructivism indeed comes with constraints, which White has described – among other places – in his intervention at the

often discussed 1990 Los Angeles colloquium about the Holocaust and the limits of representation. Asked how he would deal with "competing narratives" of the Shoah, White (1999a:28) answered that such narratives could be "assessed, criticized, and ranked on the basis of their fidelity to the factual record, their comprehensiveness, and the coherence of whatever arguments they may contain". Thus, for White, a study of the Third Reich emplotted "in a comic or pastoral mode" could be dismissed from the "competing narratives" of the period at the most basic level, in "appealing to the facts" (30). But constraints can also be of an aesthetic nature. Among studies of World War II, White is especially critical of Andreas Hillgruber's *Zweierlei Untergang. Die Zerschlagung des deutschen Reiches und das Ende des europäischen Judentums*, in which the historian emplots the Wehrmacht's defense of the homeland in early 1945 as a "tragedy". In tragedies, White argues, "even villains are noble, or rather, villainy can be shown to have its noble incarnations" (33). Yet the Wehrmacht, however courageously it fought in 1945, could not be qualified as "noble" because of all the crimes it had committed earlier. Hillgruber's book, for White, must thus be removed from the list of legitimate competing narratives of the Third Reich, and viewed as an attempt to "redeem at least a remnant of the Nazi epoch in the history of Germany" (*Ib*.).

One of the earmarks of White's constructivism and relativism that has been most often discussed in the context of the LT is his idea that plots are not found in the evidence, but imposed upon it by the historian. To return to point # 1 on the list of the distinctions that for White postmodernism has transcended: historians, upon deciding on a subject, select the events they want to represent, and then dispose them along the organizing scheme that best fits their purpose. Commenting on this model, critics have objected that it does not accord with the way

historians actually go about the job of sorting out and textualizing their materials. According to the philosopher William Herbert Dray (2001: 176), for instance, White makes the mistake of separating the historical inquiry into two stages: first "an investigative, empirical part which establishes what actually happened in a certain region of the past", and second "an inventive, literary part, in which the historian takes on the task of arranging his discoveries into stories". If defined as "set of relationships" (177), however, stories can also for Dray be identified during the first stage of the investigation. Indeed, what historians may "find" is not just data; they may also hit upon "unknown narrativizable configurations – 'tellables' – already there for the discovering" (*Ib*.). In short, White for Dray is wrong to push his constructivism and relativism to the point of claiming that historians decide from the start on a plot model that will both determine the selection of the data and their disposition. Stories can be found as well as invented, and one of the goals of history is precisely to uncover new, yet untold stories.

5. Further Explorations

Ankersmit (2013, 424), as I mentioned earlier, delights at the idea that the LT is still "dominant", a dominance that for him implies that scholars will soon set out to identify and analyze "the many aspects of the use of language in historical writing [that] still need to be explored". Since Ankersmit does not provide a wish list, I will now go through some of these "aspects", focusing – from an "after White" perspective – on a few attributes of historical discourse which White himself has hardly dealt with. I will again proceed from my own institutional place, literary theory, a discipline from which several upholders of the LT have often selectively borrowed – and been praised or blamed for doing so.

The first issue I want to take up concerns the disposition of the data, specifically, the assumption that historians always resort to narrative when they textualize their materials. This assumption is currently shared by numerous historians, philosophers, and cultural theorists, whether they commend narrative for being a legitimate cognitive instrument (Mink, 1987; Ricoeur, 1983), or indict the genre for what they hold to be its artificial homogeneity and political conservatism (Cohen, 2006; Jenkins, 2009). This consensus is best illustrated by Chartier (2006: 969), who – long associated with the French New History and its distrust of narrative – now states that history, "even the most quantitative, even the most structural, is a member in the category 'narrative'"; and by Hartog (2005: 173), who writes that from antiquity history, however configured, has consistently "recounted the doings of men, told not the same story, but stories of different types". White himself has at various moments in his career defined historiography as a "species of the genus narrative" (2010c: 112), going as far as asserting that what the "interpretations" produced by historical discourse have in common is their "narrative mode of representation": "where there is no narrative, there is no historical discourse" (1999b: 3).

To test what has become some kind of doxa in the poetics and philosophy of history, and possibly identify the domains that scholars in the legacy of the LT may want to explore, it seems necessary to first define narrative. Literary theory, specifically narratology, can on this point contribute to the analysis of historiography, since one of its aims is to characterize narrative by distinguishing it from other modes of textual disposition. Turning to narratologists, I will with Gerald Prince (2012: 25) define the genre as "the logically consistent representation of two asynchronous events, or a state and an event, which do not presuppose or imply

each other"; and with James Phelan (2007: 203), as "somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened". Whether they treat narrative as an object or as a transaction, these definitions say basically the same thing: to count as a narrative, a text must include at least two units located on a temporal axis, even if the first one may remain implicit. Thus, the minitext "Berlin is the capital of Germany" is not a narrative, because it does not involve the representation of an event; but the subsequent minitext "Berlin became again the capital of Germany in 1999" is a narrative, because it represents a change with respect to a state and could be parsed into "Berlin was no longer the capital of Germany" and "Berlin became again the capital of Germany in 1999".

If we use Prince's and Phelan's definitions to ask whether today's historians rely on narrative, we cannot help noting that a large part of their production does not fall under storytelling. White himself (2010d: 273) has acknowledged this disappearance, observing that "in modern, 'scientific' historiography, the tendency has been to suppress storytelling in favor of synchronic representations of historical phenomena, structural-functional analyses of long-term and for the most part 'impersonal' historical processes, and model building as a means of explicating complex forces and long-term trends discernible in the historical record". Yet White, to my knowledge, has not pursued this line of inquiry, focusing in his essays about historiography on studies that have a narrative structure, or at least a narrative component. I have (Carrard, 2017), on the basis of a limited corpus, attempted to draw a map of the different textual models now in use in French historiography, and I won't rehearse my findings here. I will only mention that the "all history is narrative" thesis has been challenged on a few occasions, most interestingly by Bernard Lepetit in

the course of a seminar held during White's visit in Paris in 1992. Commenting on the model of emplotment offered in *Metahistory*, Lepetit (1999: 80) argues that it is characterized by its "historicity": designed to describe the works produced during a specific "historical moment" (82), the nineteenth century, it fails to account for the "forms taken by historical sciences in the twentieth century". Lepetit singles out a few studies falling under microhistory, such as Giovanni Levi's *Le Pouvoir au village* (*L'eredità immateriale*), Simona Cerutti's *La Ville et les métiers* (*Giustizia sommaria*), and his own *Les Villes dans la France moderne*. These studies, according to Lepetit, have a specific, non-narrative structure: "their goal is to provide neither an exhaustive description, nor a linear narrative. It is not the succession of episodes but that of analytical viewpoints and modes of observation… which shapes the development – I was about to say the plot" (85). Lepetit's hesitation here is revealing; it shows that the historian is ready to question the assumption according to which history always comes in narrative form – ready to ask whether "development", in historical studies, is necessarily synonymous with "plot". Issues of this type must certainly be raised, for instance about works that claim to do "world history", escape eurocentrism, and/or to give to oppressed, subaltern, and forgotten groups their long overdue. Besides exploring uncharted territories, do these works also experiment with new forms, specifically, with bold, untested ways of disposing their materials?

Other aspects of historical discourse that deserve further investigation because White has largely ignored them pertain to that discourse's surface structures. Busy uncovering deep structures such as modes of emplotment, White indeed has lent little attention to formal features of historiography situated at the surface level, beginning with "voice": who is speaking in historical texts? to whom? under what circumstances? Such

questions are significant, all the more so since they point to one of the basic distinctions between fictional and historical discourses. In the former, as literary theorists such as Gérard Genette (1991) and Dorrit Cohn (1990) have shown, the narrator is generally not the author: Meursault is not Camus, and the heterodiegetic narrator of *Eugénie Grandet* is not Balzac, even though he may share views that are known to be Balzac's. In historiography, on the other hand, the narrator is also the author, and the second must stand behind what the former is stating. This particular situation raises several issues for current historiography. For one thing, whereas historians traditionally were expected to absent themselves from their text, they are now asked, and by people as different as White and Jablonka, to be explicit about such things as their assumptions, their choices, and their perspectives. Yet adding self-reflexive comments comes with obvious problems of size, frequency, and relevance. Post LT research could thus investigate how today's historians satisfy the demand to show, as Jablonka puts it, "how things are done", though without weighing down the text to the point of jeopardizing its readability.

Another component of historical discourse's surface structures that White mostly leaves out is figurative language. I showed earlier how White interprets the evolution of characters in Flaubert's *L'Education sentimentale* and Marx's *Le Dix-huit Brumaire of Louis-Napoléon* in terms of a move from metaphor to irony, but his analysis bears on these works' deep structures; it deals with the tropes at the level of the text as a whole, not at the level of the single utterance. White (1999c, 2004) has examined how a novelist (Marcel Proust in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*) and a memorialist (Primo Levi in *Se questo è un uomo*) rely on individual figures to describe situations and characters, but I am not aware of essays in which he delves at the same level into the work of historians. Yet historical discourse is

rich in what might be called "surface tropes". Fernand Braudel's work, for example, displays numerous instances of personification, which critics from Lucien Febvre (1950) to Paul-André Rosental (1991) have commented upon at length. Other historians (e.g., Arlette Farge, Alain Corbin), following in the footsteps of Foucault, have endeavored to describe society not as a human being, but as a machinery whose functioning can be assessed drawing on figures coming from economics, administration, and commerce (e.g., "management", "circulation", "negotiation", "exchange"). Scholars eager to follow Ankersmit's invitation could carry out this type of inquiry. They could, for instance, ask whether resorting to tropes must be self-reflexive, that is, whether (when, where) historians must be explicit about the kind of figure they are about to use (e.g., "to turn to irony…"). Critics could also ask whether new subjects are treated with new figures, for example, whether the practitioners of connected history have drawn on unusual metaphors to describe, say, the incarnations at different places of specific cultural phenomena.

6. Are These Debates Irrelevant?

It must be mentioned, to conclude, that the debates I have just surveyed are not unanimously regarded as relevant. Indeed, some philosophers have declined to participate, because they deem issues of language to have no bearing on the status of history as a scientific discipline. At the time when the controversy mainly concerned the modes of explanation available to historians, Leon Goldstein (1976:140-141) had already proposed to distinguish between what he called the "superstructure" and the "infrastructure" of historiography. The superstructure, for him, was the finished product, the text as it is offered to readers in the form of a book, an article, or any other configuration; the infrastructure, the process of

research, the interaction with the evidence, that is, the bulk of the historians' professional activities. Goldstein was especially troubled by the "narrativist thesis" (title of chapter V in his book), in this instance, less by the idea that narrative may provide valid explanations than by the fact that formal features of historiography should become the subject of philosophical discussions. Narrative, according to him, was nothing but one aspect of historiography's superstructure, and as such did not deserve the attention lent to it by several theorists of history and literature.

Avezier Tucker has argued along the same lines in one of the major recent contributions to the philosophy of history, his treatise *Our Knowledge of the Past* (2004). Like Goldstein, Tucker deems that the superstructure of historiography is of little relevance. He will thus, as he explains in his introduction, pay "little attention" to that component, and "even less attention to the debate whether [historiography] has the structure of a narrative or not" (7). The "chief inquiry" of his book, Tucker adds, "is into the relations between historiography and evidence" (8), an emphasis that parallels a development in the philosophy of science. Indeed, the "research program" of that philosophy has shifted to focus on "issues of *validation* whether scientific theories are well founded and justified and how they change" (*Ib*.). In this regard, according to Tucker, "relations between evidence and theory" are not basically different in historiography from what they are in disciplines such as "biology, geology or physics" (*Ib*.). For the fact that historians can no longer observe the phenomena that they describe does not mean that history "can never be scientific" (*Ib*.). Physicists cannot observe what they describe, either. The object "electron" has in this respect the same status as the object "George Washington", since both entities, while being "unobservable", provide "coherence" to the discipline in which they figure (8-9). We are here, of

course, very far from the concerns of the LT, a theory that Tucker does not discuss as such in *Our Knowledge of the Past* and an entry for which does not appear in this book's index. The LT is equally absent from a recent anthology edited by Tucker, *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography* (2011), an omission that reveals, on the part of several philosophers, a lack of interest in the theories that deal with the role of language in scientific endeavors.

Let us observe, at last, that focusing on the function of evidence in historiography does not necessarily exclude taking issues of textualization into account. Jean-Marie Schaeffer, for example, in a major French contribution to the debates about the legacy of the LT, has argued that Barthes's indictment of historiography's "referential illusion" (point # 5 on White's list) was mistaken. Indeed, for Schaeffer (2016: 224-225), the "specificity" of historical discourse does not reside in the fact that it aims at "a reference that is external to it", but in its bearing on "past, no longer observable events". In brief, the problem for historians is not to reach "the exteriority as such"; it is to "gather enough evidence to justify their assertions about the past existence of that exteriority" (225), to ensure the "referential validity" of their discourse (226). Yet Schaeffer, though he deems that the basic purpose of historiography is to produce "valid" statement, does not regard as pointless the analysis of processes of textualization. He devotes several pages of his essay to the narrativist theses, arguing that the LT had become at some point a narrative turn, and asking whether "telling something is synonymous with turning it into a fiction" (233). One could add that procedures of validation are themselves susceptible to formal analyses, the inquiry bearing then not on the nature of the validation, but on the means through which it is carried out. This aspect of historiography is certainly among those that are worth exploring

from an "after White" perspective, all the more so since White himself, as several of his fellow historians have reproached him, has left it out of his concerns.

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